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2002 Coup Plotters Killed

by LADB Staff

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Venezuelan federal prosecutor Danilo Anderson died in a car-bomb explosion in mid-November, as he was on the verge of announcing indictments against the alleged plotters behind the 2002 coup that briefly deposed President Hugo Chavez (see NotiSur, 2002-05-03, 2002-04-19). The bombing led to fatal shootouts between government agents and suspects, international condemnation for the assassination, and plans for new anti-terror legislation, although no prosecutions for the murder are yet underway. Newspapers recently reported that friends of Anderson were being interviewed in relation to the crime.

Danilo Anderson had reactivated coup investigation

In September, Anderson had announced the reactivation of investigations into the coup plotters, saying that there were four hundred potential suspects who had signed a document supporting Pedro Carmona when he was named interim leader during the coup and he planned to indict them on charges of civil rebellion. A coalition of business leaders and military officers took over the Miraflores presidential palace in April 2002, gaining control of the country for 48 hours before popular protests and rank-and-file military support for the twice-elected president restored him to power.

Anderson, of the Fiscalía General de Venezuela, announced on Nov. 3 that Alfredo Pena, mayor of Caracas, and two police chiefs from the Policía Metropolitana (PM) would be formally accused as responsible for homicides that occurred during the coup, when 20 people died and another 87 were wounded. The PM is the largest armed force in Venezuela, outside of the military, and Chavez accused it as acting as the "armed wing" of the opposition.

Anderson told journalists that Pena, Henry Vivas, and Lazaro Forero would be facing three citations for the events of April 11, when violence bloodied the streets of the capital. Pena, who lost his post to Chavista Juan Barreto in municipal and regional elections last November, is also accused of "presumed misappropriation" of public funds. Pena has denied the charges.

On Jan. 6, the Fiscalía ordered the preventive detention of Vivas and Forero. The two had sought asylum from the Salvadoran Embassy in Caracas, but their request was denied. While the Venezuelan congress (Asamblea Nacional) had contemplated an amnesty for alleged "golpistas" (coup plotters) in mid-November, Chavez said it was "very early" to consider an amnesty.

Fatal explosion followed by fatal shootout

Anderson was killed by explosions that ripped through his SUV as he was driving through the capital on the night of Nov. 18, officials said the following day. Witnesses said two explosions

rocked the vehicle just before midnight on Nov. 18 as Anderson drove through the western Caracas neighborhood of Chaguaramos.

Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel and other top officials rushed to the scene. City security official Alberto Carias identified the badly charred body as Anderson after visiting the morgue. Carias called the prosecutor a "hero" and said his attack was "a provocation," urging supporters of Chavez not to respond with violence. "Violence doesn't solve anything."

Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez called the attack "a terrorist act." A spokesman for Chavez accused "terrorists" training in Florida of being behind the killing.

Information Minister Andres Izarra said Anderson's assassination was meant to derail the investigation of those who supported the coup. Izarra blamed Venezuelans in Florida, echoing accusations by Chavez that Cuban and Venezuelan exiles were training in Florida to execute him and were using the media to call for his removal. "We want the government of the United States to explain how it is that these terrorist groups act with total freedom in Florida," Izarra said.

Brian Penn, spokesman for the US Embassy in Caracas, said the Venezuelan government had not provided information to support its charges. A suspect in the Anderson killing, a lawyer named Antonio Lopez, was killed Nov. 23 in a shootout with police. Police Chief Henry Zerpa said Lopez was in his car when he was approached by police. Zerpa said Lopez tried to escape and opened fire at police, who fired back. He said two policemen were wounded in the shootout in central Caracas.

Authorities said they later searched the home of Lopez's mother and found explosives similar to those used in the car bombing.

Interior Minister Chacon said Lopez may have been part of a group hired to kill Anderson, but added that his involvement had not yet been proven. In addition to the explosives, Chacon claimed officials discovered documents indicating that Lopez was schooled in mercenary activities in the US but he declined to specify where.

Attorney General Rodriguez, meanwhile, told reporters that authorities found an SUV believed to have been used by Anderson's attackers on the night of the explosion. Police were investigating the vehicle's owner, he said, but he did not identify the person. Because of the use of C4 military explosive and a wireless device to trigger the bomb, police suspected that the people behind the incident were not common criminals, but explosives experts.

Two days later, another man, identified as Juan Carlos Sanchez, was killed by police, who said he shot at officers when they knocked on the door of his motel room in the town of Barquisimeto, 200 km west of Caracas. Police said Sanchez also had explosives in his possession similar to those used to blow up Anderson's SUV. Just days later, National Guard troops arrested two brothers in connection with the killing.

Rolando and Otoniel Guevara, both former police officers, were arrested by troops on a highway in Carabobo state, 150 km west of Caracas, Chacon said at a news conference. Chacon confirmed the brothers were arrested in relation to the slaying.

Friends questioned

In early January, the prosecutor's office announced an investigation of several of Anderson's friends "to determine whether they accepted any offer in connection with the case of [Pedro] Carmona's decree," Rodriguez said in a press release. Interior Minister Chacon talked about extortion. He told reporters that Anderson's friends supposedly contacted people who signed Carmona's decree, issued after he assumed the presidency to replace Chavez in April 2002, to ask them for money to avoid indictment by Anderson. Rodriguez said that investigators have found that "people close to the late prosecutor, misusing his confidence, may have received material offers from persons who signed a decree whereby Pedro Carmona dismantled public powers."

The attorney general added that "acceptance of such offers may have led those people to perpetrate crimes, less serious than murder but equally reprehensible, and they may eventually be subject to criminal prosecution, if the accusations are proven." "If investigations find that public officials or any other citizens are involved in crimes different from the murder [of Anderson], but which are directly or indirectly related to it, the attorney general's office will not hesitate to point to those responsible," Rodriguez said. He added that his office has ample evidence to show that the Guevara brothers and a cousin participated in the bomb attack that killed Anderson.

Government criticizes media for coverage of bombing

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Press-freedom and human rights groups have joined the Venezuelan media to criticize a new law regulating the press industry in the country, saying it impinges on free speech. Since early January, a diplomatic crisis between Colombia and Venezuela has pushed the investigation of the Anderson killing out of the headlines. The crisis arose after the Colombian government allegedly paid bounty hunters to kidnap a spokesman for the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Rodrigo Granda, from Caracas and transport him to Colombia.

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